

You have stood behind me and placed yourself in a compromised political position in international relations, and I am ... extremely grateful. I will remember that.

Novak Djokovic told Serbia's president Aleksandar Vucic during a meeting in Belgrade.



Ace left-arm paceman Mustafizur Rahman recorded his best bowling figures in Bangladesh Premier League, bagging a fiver, before skipper Imrul Kayes and Liton Das strung together a 138-run stand to help Comilla Victorians crush Chattogram Challengers by nine wickets in a curtailed-over game in Mirpur yesterday. [Bottom] Powered by a 99-run opening stand between Soumya Sarkar and Andre Fletcher, Khulna Tigers thumped Sylhet Sunrisers by nine wickets in the day game.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Worsened Dhaka traffic catches Siddons' eye

SPORTS REPORTER

Back in Bangladesh after almost a decade and the first thing that drew the attention of former Bangladesh head coach Jamie Siddons was the apparent increased Dhaka traffic.

The Australian, nevertheless, was delighted to be back in Bangladesh where he had a fruitful time as the Tigers' head coach for four years from 2007 to 2011.

Even back in the day, Siddons' penchant to roam around the city was well known. And on his first outing in the capital this time, Siddons felt that nothing much has changed except the infamous Dhaka traffic. "He [Siddons] loves Bangladesh. So, he was really delighted to have come back here. In fact, he said, nothing much has changed in his opinion except the Dhaka traffic," said Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) cricket operations committee chairman Jalal Yunus to The Daily Star yesterday.



Siddons, who arrived in the country on Wednesday, has been contracted by the BCB for two years as its batting consultant. And yesterday, he showed up at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur and observed the BPL encounter between Sylhet Sunrisers and Khulna Tigers. However, the BCB is yet to discuss and finalise the 57-year-old's main role. "This is just his first day here. He just came to the stadium and was happy to observe the match. We still didn't have any formal conversation with him as it is just his first day. We will sit and talk with him about his role soon and let everyone [media] know about it," Jalal informed.

Soumya, Mithun's upswing at last

Mohammad Mithun and Soumya Sarkar's Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) campaign had not been going particularly well till now but the return to runs for the local duo should give them some confidence with the tournament approaching towards its end.

SPORTS REPORTER

Mithun had been the subject of online trolling for a while and underperformance saw him dropped from the national team's ODI and T20 lineups. A run of poor scores in the BPL further added to the woe, his only saving grace in recent times being the double-hundred he hit in the Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL).

Soumya, too, found BPL hard this season and the left-hander was unable to take advantage of the wickets in the Chattogram phase. The duo, who had also been teammates at Central Zone recently, shared a light moment as Sylhet Sixers faced off Khulna Tigers today. Mithun smashed a 51-ball 71 yesterday but fell to Soumya, who celebrated with a trademark sign of the horns. It was a length delivery with width but Mithun, who capitalised on bad deliveries during his innings, only managed to find the fielder at sweeper-cover. Soumya was all smiles, sending Mithun off, perhaps telling the latter that he had gotten out to a bad delivery after a good effort.

Later, Soumya came out blazing with the bat, hitting a 31-ball 43 as his Khulna side bagged a nine-wicket win. However, Sylhet are yet to find a foothold this season, losing four of their five matches so far.

Sylhet captain Mosaddek surprisingly lamented the performance of the overseas players. "If the foreign players are not performing, then it is difficult for us. The bowling too hasn't been good and we have to have conversations regarding that,"



Mosaddek said after Khulna batters made a mockery of the 143-run target.

On the other hand, Khulna's Mushfiqur Rahim was rather happy, having said, "I don't know what happened to the top-order batsmen [Soumya and Andre Fletcher starred in a 99-run opening stand]. I knew if they [Fletcher and Sarkar] applied themselves on a batting wicket then they would come good." Khulna now have three wins from six matches, still in contention as the BPL gears towards its end.

FIZZ AFTER THE RAIN

Mustafizur Rahman became the first bowler this BPL to bag a five-wicket haul during his side Comilla Victorians' match

against Chattogram Challengers. Rain had interrupted proceedings at the Sher-e-Bangla Cricket Stadium yesterday, leading to play being stopped for 64 minutes. The left-armed had bagged one wicket before rain but once play commenced, Fizz started to have his say, removing Shamim Hossain and opener Will Jacks, out after a 37-ball 57.

In his next over, Fizz hung on to a brilliant one-handed catch to account for Mohammad Naeem before picking up the crucial wicket of Benny Howell with a trademark slower. And the wicket of Mehedi Hasan Miraz saw Fizz finish with five for 27. He became the seventh Bangladesh bowler to bag a five-wicket haul in BPL while it was also his third fiver in T20s.

Mujeeb happy with wickets

SPORTS REPORTER

Although Andre Fletcher felt it was easier to go after spinners, Bangladesh players may not feel the same when Afghanistan come here to play three ODIs and two T20Is.

One Afghan star, Mujeeb Ur Rahman, has been making a big impact since his arrival to the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) to represent Fortune Barishal.

The wickets at Mirpur had confounded Australia and New Zealand during home series before the T20 World Cup. But while the ball turns and stays slow for most spinners in Mirpur, the Afghan spinners can terrorize batters on any surface. Thus the wickets used to bamboozle Australia and New Zealand could be a blessing in disguise for the likes of Mujeeb and Rashid Khan in the upcoming series. "We are happy to be playing here. We played a lot of series here. But my bowling in this BPL is very economical and I also got some wickets. After BPL we have a series against Bangladesh. We are happy that the conditions here favour spin, we are happy about the spin in Asia but especially in Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet," he said.

Mujeeb said both teams would be looking for all available points in the upcoming series, which will signal Bangladesh's start to the ODI Super League.

Covid-hit Tigresses got other headaches

SPORTS REPORTER

Just hours before the Bangladesh women's cricket team yesterday boarded their scheduled flight for New Zealand for their maiden ODI World Cup campaign, the Tigresses' camp was hit by Covid-19 as three members of the squad tested positive.

One cricketer and two support staff members had to stay back and would now be required to undergo an eight-day isolation period before they are allowed to join the squad in Auckland.

While the Covid-affected players having to stay back or even skip a tour is not surprising or worrisome anymore, there remain other concerns regarding the Nigar Sultana-led Bangladesh squad.

Not only will this be Bangladesh's maiden appearance in the ODI World Cup, but it is also set to be the Tigresses' first tour to New Zealand -- a country where conditions have always been challenging for their male counterparts.

Bangladesh, with no foreign coaches at their disposal, also went on the back of a disappointing campaign at the ICC Commonwealth Games Qualifier in Malaysia that ended last month. With a single spot to grab at the 2022 Commonwealth Games, scheduled to be held in Birmingham from July this year, Bangladesh failed to cross the final hurdle as they lost to Sri Lanka by 22 runs in the final match of the qualifiers.

However, keeping in mind the need for better preparation and adjusting to the conditions, Bangladesh are traveling with time in hand. After a mandatory 10-day quarantine period in Auckland, the Tigresses are scheduled to play two official warm-up games before the mega event. But before that, they will also engage in two practice games against New Zealand local teams.



Bangladesh women's cricket team players take a selfie at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday before leaving for New Zealand for the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup in March-April this year.

PHOTO: BCB

Beijing Games set to open

AFP, Beijing

Thomas Bach will meet Peng Shuai at the Beijing Winter Olympics to assess her "physical integrity and her mental state", the IOC chief said Thursday, as controversy dogged the Games right up to the eve of the opening ceremony.

Bach said the International Olympic Committee would support an inquiry into the tennis star's allegation of sexual assault against a top-ranking Chinese politician -- if she calls for one. The lead-up to the Beijing Olympics, which open on Friday with a ceremony at the "Bird's Nest" stadium, have been overshadowed by human rights concerns, the Covid pandemic and even fears about Chinese government snooping of athletes.

Peng, a former Grand Slam champion doubles player, has also been a major talking point after she alleged on Chinese social media in November that former vice premier Zhang Gaoli had forced her into sex during an on-off relationship.